Q & A with Artist, Isan Brant

By Candice R. Crossey

We talked with artist, Isan Brant, about her new installation entitled, Tracing Ancient Oceans: Objects of the Anthropocene. The installation will be at Biosphere 2 through April 2018. Isan is currently pursuing an MFA in studio art at the University of Arizona.

Q: Tell us about yourself and what you do as an artist?

A: I work across media in painting, sculpture, video and poetry. My main concerns are ecological and emotional/philosophical and the connection between the two.

Q: How did you become interested in geological and ecological themes?

A: Growing up (in Montana) my family lived in a primitive home with wood for cooking and heat, an outhouse, and gardens for growing our food, surrounded by forests, rivers, and mountain ranges. This instilled in me both an acute awareness of our dependence on the earth to survive and a deep love for plants, stones, creatures, and seasons. For the last 17 years, I have worked as a wild land firefighter, a backcountry fire lookout, and a wilderness ranger in various remote locations throughout Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. I love working in the woods, sleeping among wild plants under the dark lightless sky, and learning from different ecosystems through observation. But even in my short life, I have seen these systems changing quickly due to human development, construction, and the profoundly frightening climate crisis. The briefness of ‘modern’ human activity on this planet compared to the ancient slow time of the rocks we are drilling into and hauling out of the earth is something I think about a lot.

Q: Why did you choose Biosphere 2 as the site for your recent installation?

A: Biosphere 2 has been a mythic place in my imagination since I was a child. I remember reading about it when I was really young and living in a place where wintry weather would cover about 8 months of the year (not anymore due to climate change). The idea that people had built a glass planet with ecosystems from around the world - jungle, ocean, grasslands, desert – was magical to me! I’m really interested in the effort of observation and questions that science poses and feel that it is close kin to art: it is often impractical and poetic and results in more questions than answers, it is important. I am a huge fan of observation and slowing down to look closely at the minutia of the how the
Earth’s systems are working. I see Biosphere 2 as a site of intensive observation and experimentation and allowing people to access that and become excited about it. As an architectural site, Biosphere 2 is really wonderful. The fact that there is all of this intense infrastructure underneath these ‘natural’ ecosystems that are existing inside a building and the Sonoran Desert ecosystem outside the building - it’s this kind of kaleidoscoping relationship and layers of human, nature, belief and experiment that really excites me.

Q: What was the process and materials used for your installation at Biosphere 2?

A: The sculptures in Tracing Ancient Oceans are made out of wood and then carved with a chainsaw and then the pieces are burned, rusted, painted and submerged in salt water to grow crystals. Some of the sculptures have sand, marble dust and paint added to them.

Q: What is it that you hope to achieve and communicate through your work?

A: My hope is that people will feel a slower time, feel a connection to something they hadn’t felt that day yet. It is my hope that the noise and pace of life is suspended for a minute when looking at the sculptures and that there is some room for poetry in that moment.

Q: What are your goals for the future?

A: I am the descendent of European immigrants who colonized the West and brought the destructive extractive industries to this land, so I want to keep examining myself and my artwork with this in mind so that I am becoming more aware of how my actions as a person and artist are affecting the Earth. So, I guess I would say my goals for the future are to use less resources in my art and life, to engage more directly in climate activism, and to leave a lot of room for beauty and quiet in between.